

Peel, Brian.

GUIDE DOGS IN NEW ZEALAND.

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HOUSE FOR THE BLIND

GUIDE DOGS IN NEW ZEALAND - by Brian Peel (Supervisor, Adult Rehabilitation Unit, Homai College, Auckland)

The concept of a dog being trained as a mobility aid for the blind is still growing. It is estimated that two to four per cent of the blind population can benefit from a guide dog. The British Association alone is producing 350 guide dogs per year and estimate to be training 500 per year in the near future. The guide dog instructors throughout the world freely exchange ideas so that the standard of work can compete with the increasing demands of traffic and city conditions.

Perhaps 'training' guide dogs is the wrong word. It will be appreciated that the dog has to do more than just respond to a command. As the eventual owner will be unable to visually plan or confirm each command given, the dog will need to respond naturally to the environment without prompting. There has always been considerable difficulty locating the type of instructor who can 'educate' as well as 'train' a dog. The field of blind welfare is also jumping ahead in leaps and bounds, specialising in every possible way in many fields in an attempt to assist people who lose their vision. It can be appreciated that trying to combine these talents together to produce a guide dog instructor makes it difficult to find qualified instructors.

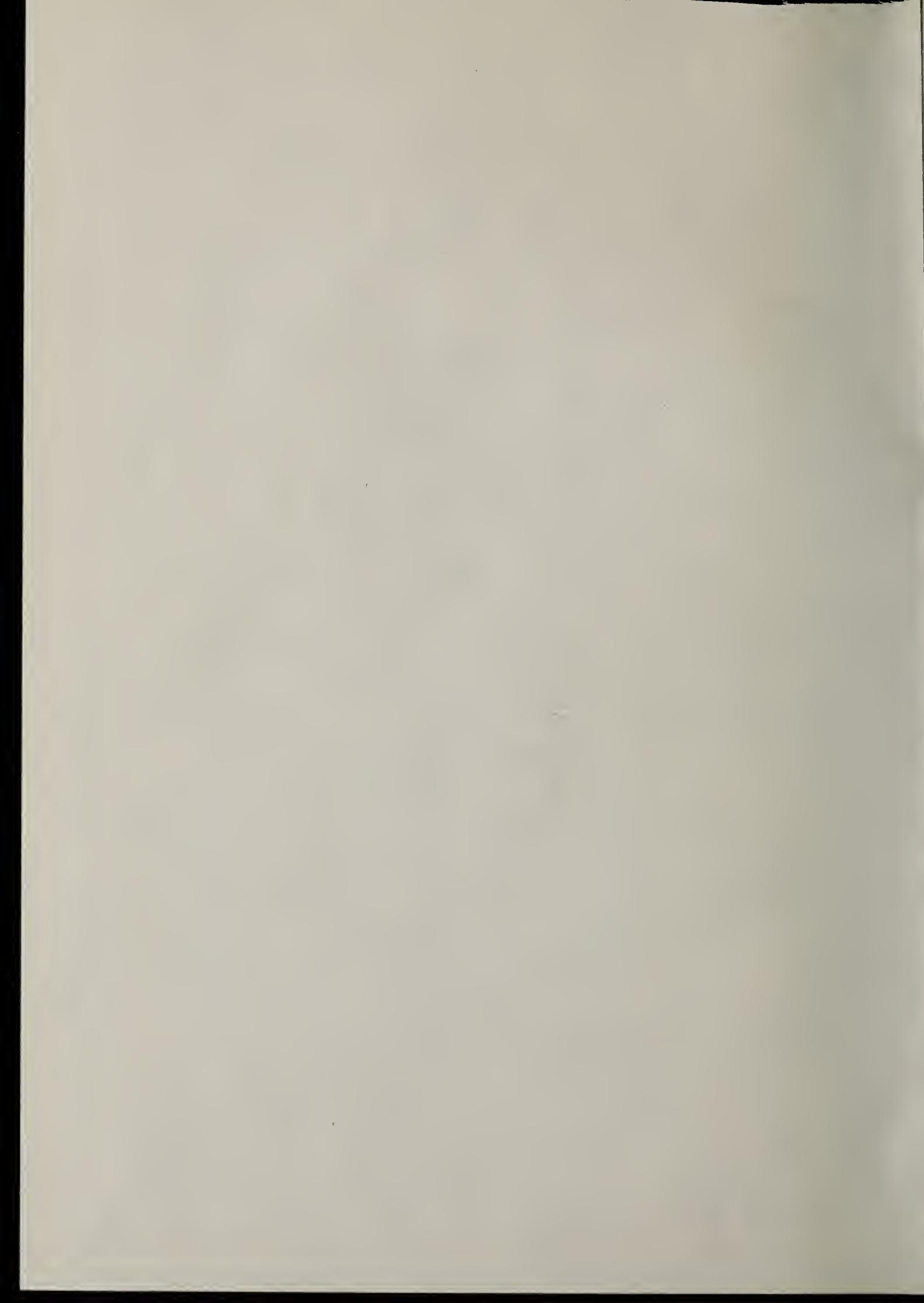
However, let us start at the beginning. How is the dog selected and trained? In New Zealand we have a breeding programme which is based in Wellington, which is voluntarily organised by the Wellington and District Labrador Retriever Club. Both the Breeding and Puppy Supervisors select suitable pedigrees based on dams and sires of very sound temperament. From the eventual litters, both males and females are selected. There is a preference for bitches as they are usually less dominant, and more socially acceptable (not likely to mark the territory in the neighbour's lounge!) However, we have found that if a male is castrated before four months the male dominance and tendencies are considerably reduced, without affecting its natural temperament and training ability.

At approximately six to seven weeks the selected puppies are palpated for hip dysplasia and then placed into 'foster homes' for a period of eight weeks. The puppy walkers, as the foster parents are called, are ordinary families with children, often without previous experience, who have the dog living with them in the house so that it can experience all that a family has to offer. After experiencing dogs, cats, people, shops, public transport, even down to the TV and rubber ducks, the dog becomes conditioned to accept all these experiences as normal.

When we first started in New Zealand we were offered 120 adult labrador retrievers. Of these, only one made the grade because the others were 'socially retarded,' unable to cope with the 'everyday' happenings. Hence the establishment of the Puppy Walking Scheme. During the period that the dogs live with the puppy walkers, the puppy walking supervisor visits the home every month to observe the growing temperament of the dog, and to advise the 'walkers' as to how to overcome any problems that may have arisen. Both the medical and temperamental history of the dog's progress is kept on record right through the dog's life. This information is useful for future programmes and to assist towards producing better temperaments.

At the age of 10 months the dog is returned to the Guide Dog Training Unit, hydatids dosed, weighed and later X-rayed for hip dysplasia. After a short settling-in period where it is noted how the dog socially mixed with the other dogs in the kennels, it experiences 10 walks with the guide dog instructor who tests its reactions to every conceivable environment i.e., people, animals, shops, public, transport, aircraft, toilets, telephone kiosks, water, weather etc. From this information a temperamental chart is established, based on the findings of Captain Liakhoff, who was the first instructor trained by Mrs. Eustis, who formed the school in England.

*From: Mobility News, March / April 1977, No. 41,
pp. 3-16.*



A few figures may help at this stage. About 50% of the dogs are rejected on the Puppy Scheme, either because of temperamental or physical disabilities. During training, another 10% are usually rejected, because of more subtle temperamental characteristics. If they pass all of these tests, the training begins.

It is usually three years before an apprentice instructor qualifies as a grade 11 trainer and there are a further two qualifications with two years in between, before he fully qualifies in all facets of training. It is therefore impossible to cover the training of guide dogs and blind people in detail within the space allowed.

However, there are five basic principles that the training is based on: Habituation, Trial and Error, Conditioning Reflexes, Self Preservation and Willingness. In essence the dog learns to accept the size of the handler as part of itself (self-preservation), stop at all intersections (conditioning reflexes), learns to avoid obstacles and decide the safest path to travel (trial and error/habituation) and last but by no means least, have the natural willingness to please its master or mistress.

It takes approximately four months to train a guide dog (usually about six dogs go through the training at the same time) and a further month to train the new owner with the dog. During the four month period the dog learns to respond to basic commands such as sit, down, forward, right, left, back, etc., and then progresses to "find the steps," "find the crossing," "find the door," apart from the obvious positive and negative commands - "no," "leave it," "good girl," "straight on," etc. The understanding of the dog can grow to some 50 words, usually recognised by the tone of voice if used consistently. This list will grow even more when the 'new' owner uses his own phrases, and the introduction to local shops, etc., i.e., "find Farmer's," "find the milk bar," and so on. The art of this type of training is to bring to the front the dog's initiative as opposed to direct obedience. The instructor must allow the dog to go wrong on occasions, without the use of visual clues, so that she can be taught the right way, not unlike the training of young children, except of course, the dog will not develop to the point where it can reason.

Most of the training is carried out in the natural environment, i.e., quiet suburban, working right through to busy city streets and including rural areas without pavements. Apart from some basic obedience exercises, the only artificial methods of training are obstacles and traffic work. We use wooden frames with a bracket so that an assortment of obstacles can be created, either self-standing or to reach across a sidewalk. They are light-framed so that if they are knocked will easily fall over; at the same time there is plenty of room for the dog to go underneath, but not the handler.

It has always been difficult to pinpoint which principle of training the dog responds to when carrying out this part of the training - repetition, habituation, or responding to negative and positive voice control. However, the dog learns to travel left and right of the obstruction, sometimes needing the instructor to physically bang the obstacle to emphasise its existence. It is preferable that the 'unit' (handler and dog) travels to the right of an obstacle, so that the dog comes between the obstacle and the owner.

At this point of training, the dog is 'in harness' wearing a body piece with a handle attached. Included in the equipment is a choke chain and leash which can also be extended for obedience work. To begin with the instructor will 'cheat' a little and guide the dog through a series of obstacles placed both right and left of the path. Gradually the dog will 'cotton on' to what is required until it is guiding its handler through the maze of obstacles. Over a period of three days the dog will take full responsibility of the route to travel, even when the obstacles are changed around.

Much of its training follows the same pattern, the dog responding to the instructor's tone of voice to decide which is the wrong way and which is right (negative and positive praise). The physical correction, usually a jerk on the handle and/or leash,



is kept to a minimum, the ultimate control being the use of the voice only. This philosophy continues with both dog and cat distraction; in fact, any form of distraction, be it animal or human or whatever. The handler keeps the dog concentrating by the use of his or her voice control, the detection of distraction is felt through the harness handle, which is held very lightly to pick up any change of mood or movement. It is desirable to keep the body sensitivity of the dog on a high plane, much like the horse's mouth, so that only sensitive handling is required to achieve results.

The most complicated part of the whole training for the dog is traffic work, whereby the dog must learn to disobey a command if it is unsafe to follow the instruction given. A guide dog learns to stop at all intersections. The handler then listens to the traffic flow and decides when it is clear to cross. The command "forward" is given accompanied by an arm signal (visual clue for the dog). If, however, a car is coming across their path, the dog will disobey this command until the way is clear. In some cases the 'unit' is halfway across the road when an oncoming car will cause the dog to stop the unit without a command, and proceed again when it is clear. This procedure, however, is only for emergencies, it is the responsibility of the owner to attempt to cross at the safest place, i.e., pedestrian crossings, or with the help of public assistance. With the increase of modern day traffic, it isn't always possible for the dog to judge the speed of the oncoming vehicle.

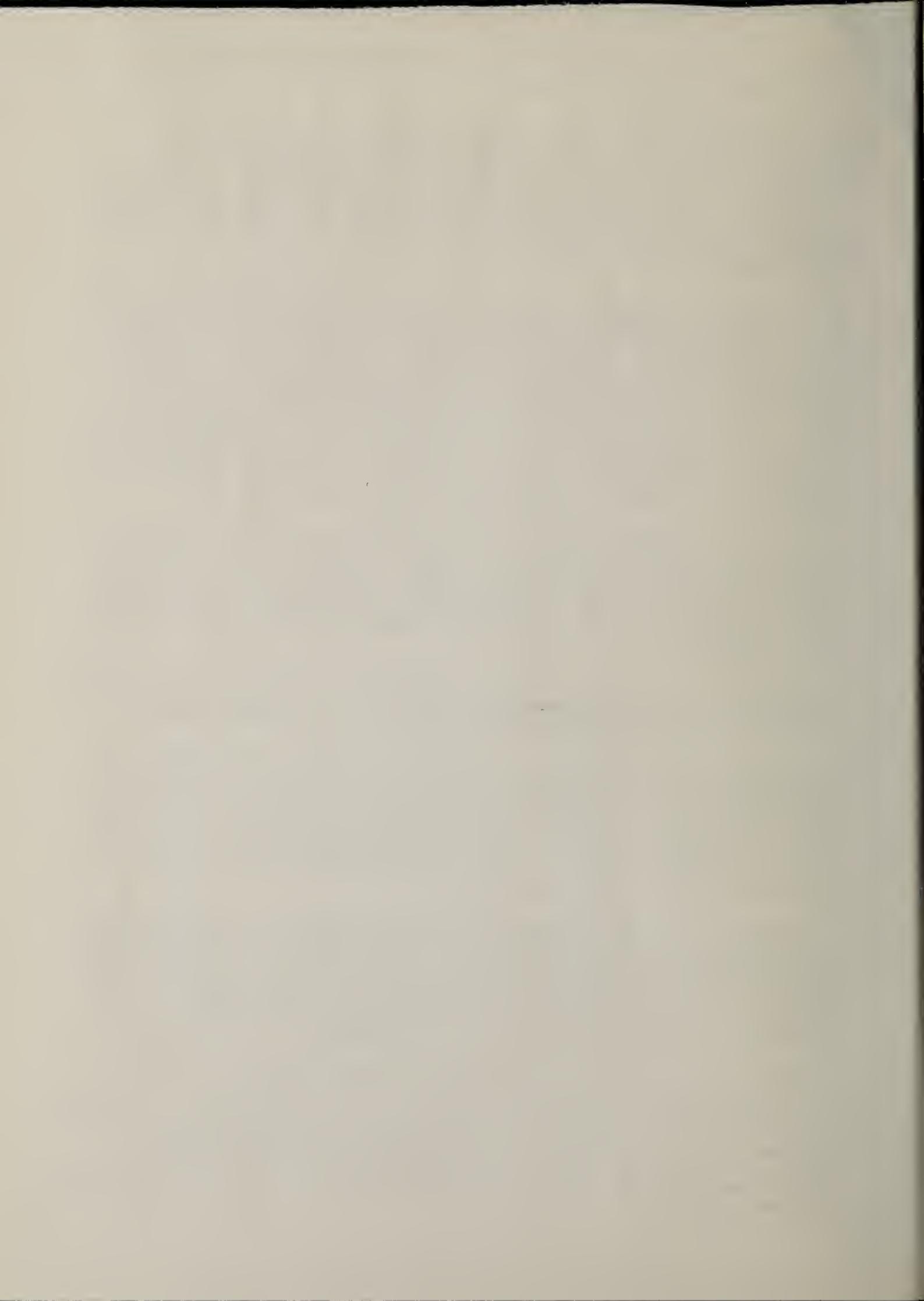
Without going into detail, through a series of exercises and controlled environmental situations the dog learns to associate the oncoming vehicle as the command to stop. To begin with, this is accompanied by the car horn, squeal of brakes, and a physical correction by the handler, all at the same time. It should be appreciated that the dog does not become frightened of the vehicle, otherwise it would not cross the road at all. This point is observed very carefully when an instructor revisits the unit in the home area.

It can be seen that as each small facet of retraining is learnt, it is only necessary to reinforce that procedure when the dog makes a mistake. This whole training process is repeated again when the blind person is matched with their trained guide dog.

The ultimate is when the guide dog associates the putting-on of the harness as all the processes of training, and only requires the minimum of voice control by the owner to keep the unit working. The whole process is then a conditioned reflex which can only be marred by outside distraction or poor handling/communication of the owner. Hence the true statement that the dog is only as good as its handler, which probably relates to all animal training. To ensure that the training is complete and to confirm that the instructor has not been visually cheating, several varied walks are taken with the handler wearing a blindfold.

The 'matching' of the guide dog and blind person is probably the most important part of the whole process. This is governed by the needs of the blind person, the family attitude towards a dog, employment situation, mobility needs and the physical ability to both use and look after a guide dog. It is an expensive aid. The total cost of training both the blind person and the guide dog is approximately 3,000 New Zealand dollars, and this is borne by the Royal New Zealand Foundation for the Blind. However, it is difficult to measure the cost of independence to the blind person.

Any blind person can apply for a guide dog and during the process of application learn a great deal of what is required of themselves and their friends. An applicant must attend a pre-mobility course at the Adult Rehabilitation Unit to learn the basic skills of being mobile without sight, through the intelligent use of the remaining senses. The whole subject of mobility for the blind has become a recognised profession and often a thorough use of the natural skills available can be enough, without a complex mobility aid such as a guide dog or a sonic aid. But that is another subject.



If an applicant is recognised as being suitable, he or she is called for a four-week training course at the Guide Dog Training Unit. Prior to this a certain amount of matching has already been carried out based on the pre-mobility or rehabilitation course, and a personal interview in the home area of all the people who will be involved. The final decision is made at the Guide Dog Training Unit and the training together begins.

We now follow the whole training process again, but taking four weeks instead of the previous four months. The dog has a form of refresher course if you like, and of course the new owner has much to learn. It is both physically and emotionally a difficult time for the blind 'instructor,' and therefore the communication between the blinded and sighted instructors has to be on a high plane.

At the completion of their course, an agreement is signed and the new unit qualifies. The guide dog owner then returns home with the dog and the instructor follows within a few days to help them both settle down. During this time a visit to the local veterinary surgeon is made so that a triangle of service is formed for the continuing welfare of the guide dog. The guide dog owner, veterinary surgeon and Guide Dog Training Unit all keep in touch with each other through reports and visits. The instructor continues bi-annual visits to all guide dog owners in New Zealand (up to June 1976 these numbered 25) as well as keeping communication going through the local welfare officers or by correspondence.

The training of a guide dog improves daily as every walk that is done is a reinforcement of the original training. It never ceases to amaze me how high a level of communication can develop between owners and their dogs. On average, a guide dog has a working life of between eight and nine years. In many cases they continue to work well until they die naturally. However, it is sometimes necessary to retire a guide dog through arthritis or the inability to cope with the everincreasing demands of the environment. The guide dog owners can keep their dogs as a pet but they are unable to be retrained with another; it is unfair for the old dog to accept a 'new' guide dog being able to take their master/mistress out. On these occasions the retired dog is placed in a suitable home, similar to the procedure with a retired racehorse.

As to the future, I can always see a growing need for guide dogs. The percentage of blind people requiring guide dogs is growing steadily. They do, after all, fill more than the need for just a mobility aid. At long last men are studying in detail the skills necessary for visually handicapped people to become mobile. We in New Zealand have been closely associated with the up-and-coming electronic aids which are being developed and there is more to come. With all this knowledge, methods of training and rehabilitation for the blind will improve, achieving a more meaningful life for people who lose their sight. It is fitting that animals assist us in this, and hopefully we are beginning to understand ourselves, more often by a better understanding of animal behaviour. Some people would even consider the relationship that develops between guide dog and blind person as being the ultimate.

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